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ABSTRACT

Magnet schools offer special courses of study in order to attract students of different racial backgrounds. The Magnet School Assistance Program was authorized by Congress to provide funds to school districts for planning and promoting magnet schools. Eligible school districts desiring such assistance submit annual applications to the Secretary of Education. These applications are reviewed, evaluated, and scored by a panel of experts. In 1987, as the program was being reviewed for reauthorization, a study was conducted to evaluate the grant award process. This document reports the results of that study. The inquiry centered around the following four questions: (1) What are the legislative, regulatory, and policy guidelines under which the grant award process operates? (2) What were the differences between the 1985 and 1987 grant award processes? (3) How were field readers selected to evaluate proposals? and (4) What were the 1987 field readers' views on the grant award process and suggestions for improvement? Responses to these questions are given and data are presented in seven tables and three figures. (VM)

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United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, U.S. Senate

October 1987

MAGNET SCHOOLS

Information on the Grant Award Process

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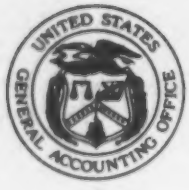

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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Human Resources Division

B-229172

October 16, 1987

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
Chairman, Committee on Labor
and Human Resources
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your June 30, 1987, request, we are providing information on the Department of Education's grant award process for the Magnet Schools[1] Assistance Program. You were specifically interested in knowing (1) the legislative, regulatory, and policy guidelines under which the grant award process operates; (2) the differences in the award processes between the program's first (1985) and second (1987) grant competitions; (3) the procedures for selecting grant reviewers (panelists), including panelists' qualifications and (4) the panelists' views on the process and suggestions for improvement. You requested this information for use by (1) your Committee during program reauthorization deliberations and (2) grant applicants as they try to better understand the program's grant award process. This information elaborates on the briefings we gave to your office on August 6 and September 14, 1987.

To address your concerns, we met with Department officials and reviewed relevant Department records and studies. Resumes and available pertinent job history information were examined to determine the qualifications of the panelists who evaluated proposals in 1987. We also telephoned all panelists to obtain their views on the grant award process and suggestions for its improvement.

GRANT AWARD PROCESS

Under the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, grants are competitively awarded to local school districts for use in projects designed to achieve voluntary desegregation and promote quality education. Three-member panels review and score grant applications based on six selection criteria (see p. 12) of varied weights. Applicants can receive additional consideration for four special consideration factors (see p. 13). In the

[1]A magnet school is a school or education center that offers a special course of study to attract substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds.

program's first two grant competitions--in 1985 and 1987--the 44 and 38 top-ranked proposals, respectively, were funded.

As part of their grant proposals, magnet school applicants are required to submit a copy of their school district's plan for the desegregation of minority group children or faculty. The Department's Office of Civil Rights certifies the eligibility of the desegregation plans, according to program regulations. If a district's plan is not certified, its magnet schools grant application cannot be considered.

COMPARISON OF THE 1985 AND 1987 GRANT AWARD PROCESSES

The overall grant award process was generally the same in 1985 and 1987. The only significant difference was the number of federal and nonfederal panelists used. In the 1985 funding cycle, there were 7 federal and 14 nonfederal panelists. In the 1987 funding cycle, 16 of the 24 panelists were federal employees. In both cycles, the federal participants were Department of Education employees.

The Department increased the number of federal panelists in 1987 to cut costs. In February 1986, the Department implemented a policy on field readers requiring the use of only one nonfederal reader on each grant review panel and prohibiting paying honoraria to nonfederal readers. However, the Department continued to pay travel and per diem costs for nonfederal panelists. After the 1987 grant competition, on June 17, 1987, Department policy on the use of field readers was revised. As a result, individual program offices now have discretion in determining panel membership and paying honoraria to nonfederal readers.

We also compared the 1985 and 1987 grant competitions in terms of the distribution of awards to highly segregated metropolitan areas. Relying on information on school segregation in the South and West regions of the U.S. contained in a July 1987 report,[2] we determined whether magnet school assistance grants were received in 1985 and 1987 by the largest school district[3]

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[2]School Segregation in the 1980's: Trends in the United States and Metropolitan Areas (prepared by Gary Orfield for the Joint Center for Political Studies, July 1987).

[3]The school districts were Atlanta City, Baltimore City, Dade County, Houston, Memphis City, and New Orleans in the South and Fresno Unified, Los Angeles Unified, Mesa Unified, Sacramento City Unified and San Francisco Unified in the West.

in each of the 11 most segregated metropolitan areas in those regions. We found that 4 of the 11 largest school districts in these geographic areas applied for magnet school funding in the 1985 funding cycle and 1 received funding. In the 1987 funding cycle, of these same 11 school districts, 8 applied for funding and 3 received funding. It is important to note that the school districts we examined that applied for but did not receive funding (3 districts in 1985 and 5 districts in 1987) were not selected because their grant proposals were judged by panelists to be less competitive than those submitted by districts that received funding.

SELECTION AND QUALIFICATIONS OF PANEL MEMBERS

According to a program official, nonfederal panelists were selected from a Department list of potential readers, including individuals who had written to the Department expressing an interest in serving as panelists and individuals who had previously served as readers. Department officials selected federal readers from among Department employees who were serving or had served as education program specialists or who were qualified to serve in such positions.

According to the Department's fiscal year 1987 Magnet Schools Assistance Program Evaluation Plan, panelists were to have expertise in curriculum development, staff development, educational programs, information dissemination, knowledge of the desegregation process, and knowledge of discrimination matters. According to the program official responsible for selecting panelists, individuals were considered to be qualified if they had expertise in three of the six areas. Documentation was available for 23 of the 24 panelists. We reviewed the resumes of the nonfederal panelists and the position descriptions and personal qualifications statements of the federal panelists, and found that both federal and nonfederal readers had expertise in three or more of the required areas. In addition, as required by program guidelines, we found that all areas of expertise were represented on each panel.

VIEWS ON THE GRANT AWARD PROCESS

Our telephone survey of the 24 panelists who participated in the 1987 grant competition surfaced problems associated with (1) the time allowed to review and evaluate grant proposals and (2) the potential effect of the continued lack of an honorarium being paid to nonfederal readers.

Panelists were almost evenly divided on the issue of whether adequate time was provided to review grant proposals. Thirteen

of the 24 panelists believed that the designated time was inadequate for properly reading and scoring proposals. Panelists had 5 days to read and score 15 to 16 proposals. In response to our request for suggestions on how the review process might be improved, panelists suggested lengthening the amount of time allotted for reviewing proposals. Department officials stated that they are considering lengthening the review period if funding for panelists' expenses is available.

We asked the eight nonfederal panelists if and how the lack of an honorarium would affect their decision to read Magnet Schools grant proposals in the future. Five said that they may not serve as panelists again, and the other three said that the lack of an honorarium would not affect their decision to participate. Department officials said that as a result of the June 17, 1987, change to Department policy, which permits offices to pay up to $100 per day as an honorarium to nonfederal panelists, they would consider using funds to pay for the travel and per diem expenses of a greater number of nonfederal readers, provide honoraria, or some combination of both options.

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As requested by your office, we also discussed with Department officials certain observations we had concerning the grant selection process. For example, panelists did not uniformly use desegregation plans in scoring grant applications. We also observed that current selection criteria are not aimed at maximizing the reduction of minority group segregation. Revising the criteria could help highly segregated school districts receive magnet school grants.

Because of time limitations, we did not obtain official agency comments on this report. We did, however, discuss its contents with Department officials and made changes based on their comments, where appropriate. We plan to send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others on request.

Should you wish to discuss the information provided, please call me on 275-5365.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Gainer

William J. Gainer
Associate Director

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ABBREVIATIONS

GAO	General Accounting Office
OCR	Office of Civil Rights
OESE	Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

MAGNET SCHOOLS:

INFORMATION ON THE GRANT AWARD PROCESS

BACKGROUND

A magnet school is a school or education center that offers a special course of study to attract substantial numbers of students of different racial backgrounds. To assist local school districts in their desegregation efforts, in 1984, the Congress authorized the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. Authorized under title VII of the Education for Economic Security Act (Public Law 98-377), as amended, the program provides grants to eligible school districts for projects in magnet schools.

Local school districts may use funds to plan and promote academic and vocational programs in magnet schools; to purchase books, materials, computers, and other equipment for magnet school programs; and to pay or subsidize certified or licensed school teachers in magnet schools.

Eligible school districts desiring magnet school assistance submit annual applications to the Secretary of Education. The applications are reviewed and evaluated by panels of federal and nonfederal experts (field readers) who are selected because of their academic backgrounds and experience in education and desegregation matters. Field readers score each application on the basis of evaluation criteria and special consideration factors established by the Department of Education. The applications are then ranked by the Department according to the field readers' scores and selected for funding.

The Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) administers the program. The Magnet Schools program office within OESE carries out the program's day-to-day operations.

Grant competitions are held every 2 years. Since the Magnet Schools Assistance Program's initiation in 1985, about $222 million in grants have been awarded. Grants totaling $150 million were awarded competitively in 1985 and 1987. In 1986, $72 million in noncompetitive continuation grants were made to grantees funded in the previous year.

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

In a June 30, 1987, letter we were asked by the Chairman, Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources, to review the grant award process for the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. The Chairman requested this information for (1) the Committee's use during program reauthorization deliberations and (2) grant applicants as they try to understand the program's grant award

process. Committee staff were briefed on the results of our work on August 6 and September 14, 1987.

Based on the Chairman's request and later discussions with his office, our objectives were to provide information concerning

-- the legislative, regulatory, and policy guidelines under which the grant award process operates;

-- the differences, if any, between the 1985 and 1987 grant award processes;

-- the procedures by which reviewers of grant proposals are selected, including reviewers' qualifications to evaluate grant proposals; and

-- the 1987 field readers' views on the grant award process and suggestions for improving it.

To obtain requested information on how the grant review processes operated in funding cycles 1985 and 1987, we reviewed relevant legislation, regulations, program plans, and instructions, and interviewed those Department program officials who were responsible for the grant review processes during the 1985 and 1987 grant competitions. To identify differences between the 1985 and 1987 grant award processes, we reviewed and analyzed program application and funding records.

To assess the impact of the program on desegregation, we looked at the distribution of magnet school awards to the largest school districts within the 11 most segregated metropolitan areas in the South and West--the only geographic regions for which segregation data were available. These statistical data on school segregation in the nation's metropolitan areas were obtained from a July 1987[1] report by Gary Orfield and issued by the Joint Center for Political Studies. In this study, segregation was measured in terms of the percentage of white students in schools serving primarily black students (the lower the percentage rate, the greater the segregation). Data on the number of minority children in selected school districts in these metropolitan areas were obtained from a 1984 Department survey conducted by its Office of Civil Rights (OCR). These data were the most recent available.

To determine if the 1987 field readers met program selection criteria, we examined all of the 8 nonfederal field readers' resumes and 15 of the 16 federal readers' job descriptions and/or personal qualifications statements (SF 171 forms) maintained by the

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[1]School Segregation in the 1980's: Trends in the United States and Metropolitan Areas, prepared by Gary Orfield for the Joint Center for Political Studies, July 1987.

Department. Information on one of the federal readers was not available at the time of our review. We assessed the readers' qualifications based on documentation in reviewers' personnel files concerning their academic backgrounds, work experiences, and professional skills.

To obtain field reviewers' views regarding the grant award process, we conducted a structured telephone survey of the 16 federal and 8 nonfederal readers who read and scored proposals in the 1987 funding cycle. All field readers responded to our survey.

Except for the specific question we were requested to answer on the differences between the 1985 and 1987 grant award processes, we focused our review on the 1987 funding cycle since it was the most recent one in which a grant competition was held.

Because of time limitations, we did not obtain official agency comments on this report. However, we discussed its contents with Department officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

Other than the exceptions cited above, our review was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

QUESTION 1

WHAT ARE THE LEGISLATIVE, REGULATORY, AND POLICY GUIDELINES UNDER WHICH THE GRANT AWARD PROCESS OPERATES?

The purpose of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program is to support (1) the elimination, reduction, or prevention of minority group isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial portions of minority students and (2) courses of instruction in magnet schools that will strengthen students' knowledge of academic subjects and acquisition of tangible and marketable vocational skills. To be eligible to receive financial assistance under the act, school districts must be (1) implementing an approved court-ordered plan requiring the desegregation of segregated minority group children or faculty in the districts' elementary and secondary schools or (2) implementing, or will implement, if program assistance is provided, a voluntary plan in compliance with title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for the desegregation of such children or faculty.

Application submission

For the 1987 funding cycle, the Department invited program award applications through an August 4, 1986, notice in the Federal Register. The application submission deadline was November 7, 1986. Upon request, application packets containing application forms and instructions, a copy of the act and implementing regulations, and related information were sent to interested school districts. According to a program official, application packets were also sent to others, such as previous years' applicants, state departments of education, the heads of the state departments of education, and state race desegregation offices.

According to program officials, the program office staff provided technical assistance in completing the applications to all applicants who requested it. This assistance was provided through workshops, meetings, and telephone conversations.

Each school district applying for a grant was required to submit, as part of its application,

-- certain federal assistance and budget information;

-- a program narrative addressing the selection criteria (see p. 12);

-- supplemental data addressing special consideration factors (see p. 13);

-- signed assurances of compliance with all applicable regulations, policies, and guidelines; and

-- a copy of the district's desegregation plan.

Applicants were required to submit the original and two copies of their applications to the Department's Application Control Center, which logged in the applications and forwarded them to the program office.

Office of Civil Rights review of the desegregation plan

The program office forwarded one copy of each applicant's desegregation plan to the Department's Office of Civil Rights to certify the eligibility of the applicants's plan. Upon receipt of the desegregation plans, OCR sent them for evaluation to its regional offices responsible for the school districts that submitted grant applications.

Regional office staff was responsible for certifying that, in accordance with program regulations, (1) the school district was implementing a plan ordered by a federal or state court or any other state agency or official of "competent jurisdiction," or (2) if a plan had been modified or the school district had proposed a modification, the court or other administrative body had approved the modification. In the case of voluntary plans, OCR was responsible for certifying that the plan had been approved by the Secretary of Education as required under title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for the desegregation of minority children or faculty. If OCR does not certify the desegregation plan, the Magnet School application cannot be considered for funding.

According to program officials, in the 1987 funding cycle, OCR did not certify desegregation plans for four school districts--East Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Duval County, Florida; and Oakland, California. Because OCR had not completed its evaluations before the field readers' review of the proposals, the proposals from these districts were considered for funding. However, none of the applications from these districts were ranked high enough to be funded. In the 1985 funding cycle, OCR did not certify desegregation plans for three districts--San Jose, California; Newark, Delaware; and the District of Columbia. These districts' applications, all of which had been ranked high enough for funding, were eliminated from grant funding and the next three highest ranked applicants were funded instead.

Conducting the grant competition

The 1987 grant reading session was held in Washington, D.C., from December 8 through 12, 1986. At that time 24 field readers,

making up 8 panels, read and evaluated 125[2] proposals. Each panel read about 15 to 16 proposals.

On the first day of the review week, Department officials conducted an orientation session to instruct readers on the review process. For the remainder of the week, readers reviewed and scored applications based on six application selection criteria. The six criteria and the weight associated with each in making awards under the competitive 1987 process are listed in figure 1.

Figure 1: Criteria Used for Making Awards Under the 1987 Competitive Process

Criteria	Point Weight
Quality of Project Design	35
Plan of Operation	20
Quality of Key Personnel	20
Evaluation Plan	15
Budget and Cost Effectiveness	5
Adequacy of Resources	5

Readers used a standardized application review form to record their numerical scores and narrative comments justifying those scores.

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[2]A 126th proposal submitted by the Chicago school district for funding consideration was not read and evaluated by field readers because a 1984 court decree required the Department to give the applicant funding priority. Therefore, the Chicago school district was not required to compete with other school districts for grant funds.

In addition, applicants could receive a maximum of 45 additional points for four special consideration factors. These factors are listed in figure 2.

Figure 2: Special Consideration Factors Used to Award Additional Points

Factor	No. of Points
School District's Need for Assistance	15
Proportion of Minority Group Children in Desegregation Plan	10
Recentness of Approved Desegregation Plan's Implementation	10
Degree of Promise Project Has in Achieving Act's Purposes	10

Under program procedures, each applicant's special consideration points were recorded on a special considerations worksheet and later added to the applicant's point total. Program officials assigned points for the second and third factors and part of the first factor on the basis of preestablished formulas. For example, an applicant could receive 0, 4, 7, or 10 points for recentness of the implementation of its desegregation plan depending on the specified time period in which the plan was implemented. Field readers assigned points for the fourth and part of the first factor based on their evaluations of the proposal narrative.

Although desegregation plans were included in applications for the purpose of OCR determining an applicant's eligibility, field readers were not required to read and evaluate the plans as part of their proposal review. In this regard, regulations require applicants to discuss the issue of desegregation in the proposal narrative.

According to a program official, panel members were permitted to informally discuss the contents of the proposals to clarify certain issues addressed therein. However, if there were extreme deviations in their scores for a particular proposal, panel members were instructed--though not required--to discuss their scores and attempt to reach a consensus.

Ranking and selecting applications for funding

Following the review period, readers' scores were submitted to the Department's Grants and Contracts Service, which "standardized" the scores. Standardization is a computer-assisted statistical procedure that minimizes the tendency of some readers to score applications consistently high or consistently low. The applications were then scored and ranked on the basis of the standardized scores.

Based on these standardized scores, the Grants and Contract Service prepared a rank order listing of all applications, which it sent to the program office. In funding cycles 1985 and 1987, the program office selected and OESE approved applications for funding in strict rank order.

QUESTION 2

WHAT WERE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE 1985 AND 1987 GRANT AWARD PROCESSES?

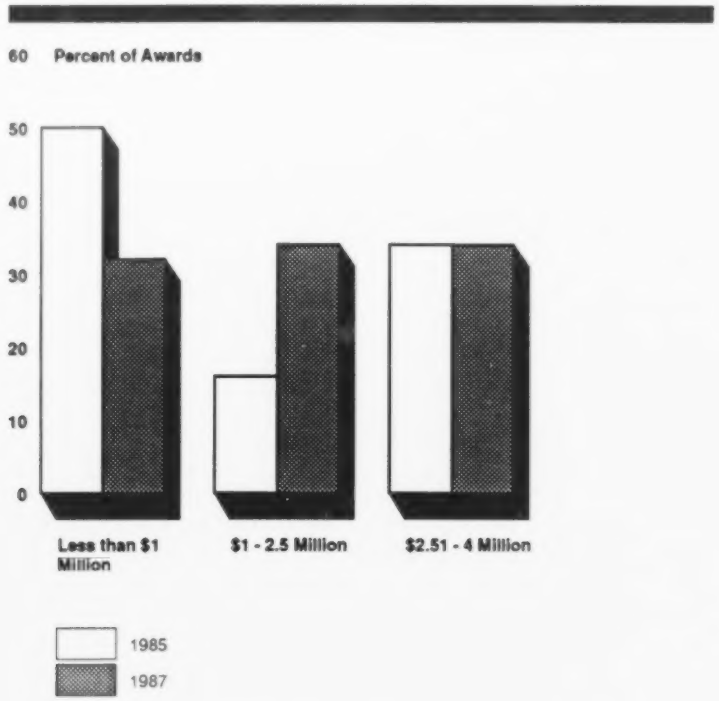
The most significant difference between the 1985 and 1987 funding cycles was in the number of federal and nonfederal reviewers used. In the 1985 funding cycle, of the 21 reviewers who read and evaluated magnet school proposals, one-third (7) were federal and two-thirds (14) were nonfederal. In contrast, in the 1987 funding cycle, one-third (8) of the 24 reviewers were nonfederal while two-thirds (16) were federal. In both funding cycles, all federal readers were Department employees. Table 1 summarizes, for the 1985 and 1987 funding cycles, information regarding the amount of funds awarded, the number of applicants and grantees, and the number of reviewers who read and scored the grant proposals. Figure 3 shows the distribution of grant award amounts in funding cycles 1985 and 1987.

In the 1987 funding cycle, the Department used proportionately more federal and less nonfederal readers than in 1985 to cut Department costs. This change was made as a result of a February 28, 1986, Department policy that required the use of only one nonfederal reader on each grant review panel and prohibited the payment of honoraria to nonfederal readers. However, the Department continued to pay travel and per diem costs, according to government travel regulations, for the nonfederal readers in the 1987 funding cycle.

Table 1 : Summary of Magnet Schools Assistance Program Grant Reviews
(Funding Cycles 1985 and 1987)

Characteristics	1985	1987
Funds Granted		
Total Funds Granted	$75,000,000	$75,000,000
Proposals		
Number Submitted	125	126
Number Funded	44	38
Percent of Second Time Grantees	---	42
Reviewers		
Federal	7	16
Non-federal	14	8
Total	21	24

Figure 3: Comparison of Grant Award Amounts for the 1985 and 1987 Funding Cycles



As shown in table 2, of the 38 grantees funded in the 1987 funding cycle, 22 were new grantees, and 16 had received awards in the 1985 funding cycle.

Table 2 : Distribution of Funds Awarded to First Time and Second Time Grantees
(Funding Cycle 1987)

Awards	1st Time Grantees	2nd Time Grantees
Number	22	16
Amount	$38,992,367	$36,007,633
Percent of Funds	52	48

We also analyzed the distribution of awards by geographic region. As shown in tables 3 and 4, in the 1987 funding cycle, the number of grants awarded to each of the nation's four geographic regions was more directly proportional to the region's proposal submission rate than in 1985. For example, in funding cycle 1987, southern school districts received 34 percent of the number of magnet school awards and submitted 34 percent of the proposals. By contrast, in 1985 Southern school districts had 21 percent of the awards and 30 percent of the proposals submitted.

Table 3: Magnet Schools Assistance Program Awards by Region
(Funding Cycle 1985)

Region	Proposals Submitted		Proposals Funded	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Northeast	40	32	14	32
South	38	30	9	21
North Central	29	23	12	27
West	18	15	9	20

Table 4: Magnet Schools Assistance Program Awards by Region
(Funding Cycle 1987)

Region	Proposals Submitted		Proposals Funded	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Northeast	37	29	11	29
South	43	34	13	34
North Central	26	21	9	24
West	20	16	5	13

We also compared the results of the 1985 and 1987 grant competitions in terms of the distribution of awards to highly segregated metropolitan areas. To determine the impact of the Magnet Schools Assistance Program in accomplishing its goal of desegregation, we looked at whether program funds were being obtained by the 11 largest school districts[3] in the nation's 11 most segregated metropolitan areas in the South and West--the two major geographic regions for which data were available. Of these 11 school districts, only 1 received magnet school assistance in funding cycle 1985 and 3 received such assistance in 1987. The 10 school districts in the 11 selected metropolitan areas we reviewed that did not receive magnet school assistance in funding cycle 1985 represented about 1 million minority children; the 8 districts that did not receive magnet school assistance in funding cycle 1987 represented about 967,000 minority children. Conversely, the one district in funding cycle 1985 that received magnet school funds represented about 151,400 minority children, and the three

[3]These were Atlanta City, Baltimore City, Dade County, Houston, Memphis City, and New Orleans in the South and Fresno Unified, Los Angeles Unified, Mesa Unified, Sacramento City Unified, and San Francisco Unified in the West.

districts that received funds in the 1987 funding cycle represented about 230,500 minority children.

As shown in table 5, in funding cycle 1985, 7 of the 10 districts that did not receive magnet school funds did not apply for assistance; in funding cycle 1987, 3 of the 8 districts that did not receive magnet school assistance did not apply for such assistance. The districts that applied for but did not receive funding had grant applications that were ranked lower than those school districts that were funded.

It should be noted, however, that current selection criteria are not aimed at maximizing the reduction of minority group segregation. However, in July 1987, the Department did propose changing the factor relating to "degree to which the proposed project affords promise of achieving the Act's purposes" (see p. 13) from a special consideration factor to a regular selection criterion. According to Department officials, they may also revise the program regulations so that the selection criterion would take into account the degree to which minority children could be expected to move from segregated schools to magnet schools. This would allow the potential impact on desegregation to play a greater role in grant selection.

Table 5: Magnet Schools Funding Status of the Most Segregated Metropolitan Areas in the South and West (Funding Cycles 1985 and 1987)

Metropolitan Area	Percent Whites in Typically Black Schools	Funds Awarded 1985	Funds Awarded 1987
South			
Baltimore, Maryland	15.8	Did Not Apply	Did Not Apply
Miami, Florida	16.1	No	No
Atlanta, Georgia	17.2	Did Not Apply	Did Not Apply
New Orleans, Louisiana	18.0	Did Not Apply	No
Memphis, Tennessee	18.4	Did Not Apply	No
Houston, Texas	19.0	Yes	Yes
West			
Los Angeles, California	15.7	No	No
San Francisco - Oakland, Calif.	17.5	Did Not Apply	Yes
Fresno, California	30.3	No	No
Sacramento, California	37.0	Did Not Apply	Yes
Phoenix, Arizona	37.4	Did Not Apply	Did Not Apply

Source: School Segregation in the 1980's: Trends in the United States and Metropolitan Areas, prepared by Gary Orfield for the Joint Center for Political Studies, July 1987.

QUESTION 3

HOW WERE FIELD READERS SELECTED TO EVALUATE PROPOSALS?

The Department of Education uses review panels to read and evaluate proposals submitted for funding under the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. Federal and nonfederal field readers are required to meet six program-established criteria and are selected on the basis of their academic credentials and experiences in areas related to the implementation of magnet school programs. According to the official responsible for selecting the field readers, panelists were considered to be qualified if they had expertise in three of the six required areas. Based on our review of the qualifications of the field readers who reviewed grant proposals for the 1987 funding cycle, we believe that for each reader whose qualifications we reviewed, the reader had expertise in three or more of the required areas of expertise. In addition, we found that, as required by program guidelines, all areas of expertise were represented on each three-member review panel.

Selection of field readers

For the 1987 funding cycle, the Department used both federal and nonfederal field readers to evaluate proposals submitted for funding under the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. According to a program official, nonfederal readers were selected from a list of potential readers maintained by OESE. The list included individuals who had written to the Department expressing an interest in serving as reviewers and individuals who previously served as readers. For funding cycle 1987, the Magnet Schools program chief reviewed the list and resumes of potential readers and selected eight persons and several alternates. These names were sent for approval to the assistant secretary of elementary and secondary education. Upon approval of the names, invitations to review proposals were then sent to those persons approved to serve as readers.

Department of Education program officials selected federal readers from among Department employees who were serving or had served as education program specialists or who were qualified to serve in such positions. According to the then Magnet Schools program chief, all of the Department employees selected to read magnet school proposals in the 1987 funding cycle were civil service employees. Department personnel officials verified that none were political appointees.

In addition, the same official told us that no reader was permitted to serve as a panelist for three consecutive funding cycles. However, some readers who read in 1985 were asked to return and read for a second time in 1987. In the 1987 funding cycle, three of the eight nonfederal readers and four of the

federal readers had read magnet school proposals during the previous competitive grant process in 1985.

Qualifications of field readers

According to the Magnet Schools Assistance Program Evaluation Plan for the 1987 funding cycle, field readers were to have expertise in six areas. However, the plan did not specify how many areas of expertise a reader needed to be considered qualified. It also did not specify what kinds of experiences or educational courses qualified a potential reader as an expert in any of the required areas.

The Magnet Schools program chief who was responsible for developing the list of reader qualifications and subsequently selecting readers told us that she expected readers to have expertise in three or more of the required areas of expertise. The criteria and the program chief's interpretation of those criteria follow.

-- Curriculum development - experience in teaching curriculum development, experience in developing curriculums for a school district, or other experience with curriculum development.

-- Staff development - experience as a trainer or teacher of staff development techniques, or experience in staff development activities.

-- Educational programs - experience working in a school or university setting or experience as director of a federal educational program. Federal readers were considered experienced in this area if they had worked as education program officers.

-- Information dissemination - knowledge of or experience in sending out information and materials or sharing information.

-- Knowledge of the desegregation process - experience working in a desegregation program.

-- Knowledge of the contexts of discrimination - knowledge of the laws and rules governing desegregation efforts, either through experience or academic study, or work experience in race or sex equity programs.

Based on our review of the resumes of the nonfederal readers and the position descriptions and personal qualifications statements of 15 of the 16 federal readers, each reader had expertise in 3 or more of the required areas and all areas of expertise were represented on each panel. However, as shown in

table 6, in the areas of curriculum development and knowledge of the desegregation process, proportionally fewer federal readers than nonfederal readers appeared to have the required expertise. It is important to note that in some instances, we determined that a field reader did not meet one or more of the program selection criteria because available documentation did not contain sufficient descriptive information that indicated expertise in a required area. However, the Department official who selected the readers told us that readers' qualifications were often known to the Department because these readers had previously worked with the Department. Because of time limitations, we did not discuss these cases with the program official who selected the readers.

Table 6: Comparison of the Percentage of Federal and Nonfederal Reviewers Meeting Program Selection Criteria (Funding Cycle 1987)

	Areas of Expertise					
	Curriculum Development	Staff Development	Education Programs	Dissemination	Desegregation Knowledge	Discrimination Knowledge
Non-federal	75	88	100	100	100	100
Federal	47	87	100	93	60	87

The program official responsible for selecting readers in the 1987 funding cycle told us that the pool of federal readers qualified to evaluate magnet school proposals is dwindling and that more qualified nonfederal readers are available than federal readers. She also stated that nonfederal readers are better qualified because they are actively involved with desegregation projects and better able than federal employees to keep abreast of trends in the field.

OESE officials told us that as a result of a June 17, 1987, Department policy change, which gives program offices discretion in selecting an appropriate mix of federal and nonfederal readers, they will consider using more nonfederal readers for the next Magnet Schools grant competition in fiscal year 1989.

Panel composition

When the 24 readers met in December 1986, they were divided into eight panels to read and score 125 proposals. Each panel was

composed of three readers--two federal and one nonfederal. According to the Department official who served as the Magnet Schools program chief at the time, the Department attempted to diversify panels by race, gender, expertise, and area of residence.

Based on a review of the qualifications and characteristics of the members of each panel, we found that panels were diversified by gender and that each area of expertise, discussed on page 23, was possessed by at least one member of each three-member panel. However, panelists were disproportionately from the South because most readers were federal employees residing in the Washington, D.C., area. In addition, panelists were predominately black. According to race information on each of the 24 panelists, which was provided to us by the former chief of the Magnet Schools program, 15 were black, 6 were white, 2 were Native American, and 1 was Hispanic.

In assigning readers to panels, care was taken to avoid assigning readers to read proposals from their area of residence. We found only one instance in which a nonfederal panel member was assigned to read a proposal from his own state.

QUESTION 4

WHAT WERE THE 1987 FIELD READERS' VIEWS ON THE GRANT AWARD PROCESS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT?

We conducted a structured telephone survey of the 1987 field readers to solicit their views on the Magnet Schools Assistance Program's grant review process and how it could be improved. Summarized below are reader responses to the survey questions.

Adequacy of training

Ten of the 24 field readers reported receiving 3 to 5 hours of training before reviewing and scoring applications and one could not recall the amount of training provided. The other 13 field readers reported a range of hours, from less than 3 to 8. While most field readers felt that the training was adequate, eight readers believed that the training should be lengthened or improved. Generally, these readers felt that there should be a full day of training or more emphasis on practical application of the evaluation criteria using one sample proposal, rather than a different proposal for each panel, as was used in the training, provided in December 1986, for the 1987 review cycle.

Adequacy of review time

Field readers were nearly evenly divided on the issue of whether there was sufficient time to review and score proposals. Thirteen readers felt they did not have adequate time to read and score proposals, while 11 found the designated 5 days (including training before reviewing and scoring applications) sufficient time to complete their work.

Of the 13 readers who felt that the designated time was inadequate, 5 reported that they had to read late into the evening to complete their work on time. Also, 2 of the 11 readers who felt that the review time was adequate reported that they, too, read late into the evening to finish their task on time. In addition, two federal readers stated that they were unable to complete the assigned reading within a week and had to work into the next week to complete their assignment.

Four field readers believed that proposals read late at night or near the end of the week may have received a less thorough review than other proposals because readers felt pressured to finish on time.

In response to our request for suggestions on how the Magnet Schools grant review process might be improved, 12 of the 24 readers suggested lengthening the review period. Suggestions ranged from an additional 1 day to more than 5 additional days for

review. Table 7 shows how much additional time the 12 readers thought necessary to adequately review and score grant proposals.

Table 7: Additional Time Needed for Review of Magnet School Proposals

Suggested Additional Time	No. of Field Readers
1 to 2 Days	4
3 to 4 Days	2
5 Days	5
Over 5 Days	1

As an alternative to lengthening the review week, 4 of the 24 field readers suggested increasing the number of readers and panels, thereby decreasing the number of proposals assigned to each reader.

While field readers felt that an alternative could be found to lengthening the review period, the majority rejected the suggestion that proposals be made available to reviewers before the review period. Only 9 of the 24 field readers felt that the opportunity to read proposals before the review period is a desirable alternative.

In response to the field readers' concern that they may not have had adequate time to read and properly score proposals, Department officials stated that they would consider lengthening the review period if funds are available.

Reviewers' receipt and use of desegregation plans in evaluating grant proposals

Field readers' responses to our survey suggest a discrepancy in the role that desegregation plans played in the 1987 Magnet Schools Assistance Program's grant review process. Although a program official told us that each applicant's proposal was accompanied by a copy of the applicant's desegregation plan, not

all field readers recalled receiving a copy of each applicant's plan. Of the 24 readers, 16 recalled receiving a plan with each proposal they read, 3 recalled receiving some plans, 3 recalled receiving no plans, and 2 were unable to recall whether they had received plans.

All 19 readers who recalled receiving all or some plans said they read or referred to them during their review. Twelve of the 19 said they used information contained in the plans to evaluate proposals.

We informed Department officials of field readers' inconsistent use of desegregation plans, which could result in some inequity in the scoring of grant proposals. Department officials told us they may eliminate the desegregation plan from the information given to readers for review and scoring since desegregation plans are submitted primarily for OCR to certify an applicant's eligibility, and the grant application itself is supposed to contain pertinent information regarding the plan. If this change is made, a copy of the applicant's desegregation plan would be submitted only to OCR for eligibility certification.

Effect of federal readers on the review process

Because federal readers might be viewed as being in positions to be pressured by program officials to select certain grant proposals over others, we asked both federal and non-federal readers their opinions on the use of federal readers. Of the 24 field readers, 10 felt that the presence of federal readers on the review panel had no effect on the review process, but 7 felt that the federal readers had a negative effect on the process. For the other 7 readers, 4 felt that federal readers had a positive effect, and 3 had no opinion. Of the 10 who felt federal readers had no effect, however, 1 believed there should be more nonfederal than federal readers on each panel.

Generally, the 7 readers who felt that the presence of federal readers on the review panels had a negative effect on the review process told us that federal readers were less sensitive to local school districts' needs, out of touch with and therefore less knowledgeable about daily school operations, or less experienced with implementing desegregation programs than were nonfederal readers.

Of the four readers who felt that the presence of federal readers had a positive effect on the review process, 2 said that federal readers are more knowledgeable about federal policy and regulations or more knowledgeable about what makes a technically sound proposal and, therefore, added balance to the review process.

According to OESE officials, the June 1987 change to Department policy now gives individual offices discretion in deciding how many federal and nonfederal readers to use.

Effect of the lack of an honorarium on nonfederal readers' decision to read proposals in the future

Of the eight nonfederal readers who read and scored proposals for the 1987 funding cycle, five stated that the absence of an honorarium could negatively affect their decision to serve as readers again. The other three respondents stated that the lack of an honorarium would not negatively affect their decision to read proposals in the future.

Of the five who said they may not read again, two expressed concern that the lack of an honorarium could result in the participation of a less qualified reader in the review process. One of the five said that the lack of honoraria for readers conveys the message that the Department has lessened its commitment to the Magnet Schools program.

Department officials agreed that the honoraria issue is an important one. OESE officials told us that as a result of the June 1987 change to Department policy which now permits offices to pay up to $100 per day honorarium to field readers, they would consider whether funds would be best spent on increasing the number of nonfederal readers or paying honorarium to nonfederal readers, or some combination of both.

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